

THE NARRATOR OF THE SHORT POETRY
OF THOMAS HARDY

APPROVED:

S. Robert Stevens
Major Professor

J. Gerding
Minor Professor

Leslie H. Palmer
Consulting Professor

William F. Beecher
Chairman of Graduate Studies in English

Robert B. Toulouse
Dean of the Graduate School

JRS

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Throughout the poetry of Thomas Hardy, excluding The Dynasts, there reappears a characteristic and constant narrator device which Hardy employs to force the reader to maintain perspective and objectivity upon the action of the poems and to provide a framework of attitudes and conclusions by which the reader can judge the content of the poems. This narrator places many barriers between himself and the action of the poems: distance of time, distance in space from a remembered site, difference of experience and attitude between the speaker and his younger self, separation due to lack of involvement, and estrangement bred by isolation from the mainstream of contemporary thought.

Because the narrator is the medium through which the reader receives knowledge about the poems, he is kept one step further removed from involvement in the poetry than is the narrator. Through the various distances set up in the poems, the narrator achieves an objectivity which allows him

to gain a vision of reality denied less clear-sighted observers. The speaker, forced into an even greater lack of involvement than the narrator, has this objectivity and the narrator's conclusions forced upon him by the structure of the poems. Thus the narrator device is an important poetic tool with which Hardy can elicit from the reader the responses he desires.

The narrator present in the poems bears many and striking similarities to Hardy himself, but there are significant differences. While the narrator is able to achieve and maintain an almost total lack of involvement with other people, Hardy could not, although he seems to have longed to do so. The most important difference between them, however, is that the narrator manages to maintain an insight that the universe contains no moral order. Hardy insists that he holds the same view, but he is finally unable to break away from a moralistic sense that the world is not as it ought to be, that there is a vast and inherently immoral injustice in the cosmos.

THE NARRATOR OF THE SHORT POETRY
OF THOMAS HARDY

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Mary Herring Lyle, B. A.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the poetry of Thomas Hardy, excluding The Dynasts, there reappears a characteristic narrator, a type of speaker who unites the disparate poems by virtue of his character, values and conceptions of the universe he describes; the function and methodology of this narrator are closely allied with the world view which underlies the poetry. The narrator has several important characteristics which remain relatively constant from poem to poem. Directly or indirectly, the narrator sets the time of action of the poem as being somewhere in the past; frequently the poems concern an older man looking back on his younger self. Again and again, the narrator stresses his position as an observer, not an actor. If he acts, it is in the past that his actions took place, and even then, he functions usually as a listener. The separation in time from the events described and the impartiality gained by his passive status as an observer enable the narrator to see things more clearly, more fully, than

those involved in the action of life. The narrator, by virtue of his isolation, can see parallels, ironies, and causal relationships which are hidden from the actors by the speed of their motions and by the self-blinding urgency of their involvement.

Despite the large number of Hardy's poems which possess this recognizable narrator, rarely have critics of the poetry commented upon the subject; of those few who have noted the presence of the narrator, even fewer have discussed Hardy's use of this device in any detail. This lack of critical commentary exists despite the fact that a speaker, or narrator, is evident in not just a few, but many of Hardy's poems. For example, in Wessex Poems and Other Verses, thirty-three of the total fifty-one poems possess a narrator who, while he has recognizable traits, is not specifically identified: that is, the poems are not dramatic monologues nor are their narrators named as certain personages, as Corporal Tullidge in "Valenciennes"¹ or Old Norbert of "Leipzig."² Of the ninety-nine verses in Poems of the Past and Present, roughly fifty employ Hardy's recurring narrator device, and the other volumes of Hardy's poems seem

consistently to use this speaker in about half of the poems. The books of verse published late in Hardy's career do not differ significantly from the earlier ones in the number of narrator poems they possess. Hardy's last volume, Winter Words in Various Moods and Metres, has the narrator present in about 50 of its 95 poems.

In the prefaces to his volumes of verse, Hardy himself wrote of his poems that "much is dramatic or impersonative even where not explicitly so"³ and that "they are to be regarded, in the main, as dramatic monologues by different characters."⁴ Richard Carpenter, in a short note, suggests that as many as one out of every ten of the 900-odd verses in Collected Poems is what he calls a "dramatic narrative" and possesses, among other qualities, an identifiable persona.⁵ Carpenter's use of the phrase "dramatic narrative," however, is not technical; he talks about some poems which are dramatic monologues and some which are not but which do employ a definite narrator device. In a similar vein, Marguerite Roberts comments that "Hardy favoured the dramatic monologue,"⁶ but she does not consider in depth any of the narrators that Hardy used in those poems she

cites as examples.

Other critical comments are generally brief, also. Bruce Teets says that Hardy himself seems to appear as narrator in several of the more "meditative" poems and then goes on to a discussion of the rather overworked question of Hardy's pessimism.⁷ In the midst of a lengthy and interesting paper on Hardy's use of irony, Mary Caroline Richards remarks in passing that recognizing "the skill of the narrator" is essential to understanding much of Hardy's poetry.⁸ Another critic, David Perkins, suggests that one of the main functions of Hardy's narrator is to stand as a symbol of the "sense of personal isolation" which haunted Victorian poetry and prose.⁹

Of the longer critical works on Hardy, most are less helpful than those already mentioned; indeed, only one, J. Hillis Miller's Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire, treats the subject in detail, and even then, the commentary on the poetry is usually subordinated to that on the novels.

Miller's general thesis is that

Two themes are woven throughout the totality of Hardy's work and may be followed from one edge of it to the other as outlining threads: distance and desire--distance as the source

of desire and desire as the energy behind attempts to turn distance into closeness.¹⁰

Important to this concept of Hardy's work is his use of the narrator device, which can serve at once to separate the reader from the poems and draw him immediately into them.

Poem after poem sets a past event when the speaker was happily engaged in life against a present detachment when he has lost that happiness and looks back in retrospective meditation upon the past. He sees that past now in the perspective of what followed it, and this double vision gives him a wisdom of disengagement. Such a relation of the self to itself combines closeness to experience and distance from it, blind absorption in life and withdrawn contemplation of a past self as if it were another person. This juxtaposition of past involvement and present reminiscent isolation is the characteristic structure of the poems.¹¹

Certainly, the distancing of which Miller speaks makes itself repeatedly evident in the poems; Hardy uses the narrator device to force his readers into realization of their separation from the verses. Before this concept can be effectively considered, however, it is necessary to develop a more detailed analysis of Hardy's recurring narrator.

CHAPTER I

FOOTNOTES

¹Thomas Hardy, "Valenciennes," Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy (New York, 1925), pp. 15-17.

²Hardy, pp. 22-26.

³Hardy, "Preface to Poems of the Past and the Present," Collected Poems, p. 175.

⁴Hardy, "Preface to Time's Laughingstocks," Collected Poems, p. 175.

⁵Richard Carpenter, "Hardy's Dramatic Narrative Poems," English Literature in Transition, IX (1966), 185.

⁶Marguerite Roberts, "The Dramatic Element in Hardy's Poetry," Queen's Quarterly, LI (Winter, 1944-45), 432.

⁷Bruce Teets, "Thomas Hardy's Reflective Poetry," English Literature in Transition, IX (1966), 183.

⁸Mary Caroline Richards, "Thomas Hardy's Ironic Vision (Part One)," The Trollopian: A Journal of Victorian Fiction, III (March, 1949), 276.

⁹David Perkins, "Hardy and the Poetry of Isolation," English Literary History, XXVI (1959), 253-270.

¹⁰J. Hillis Miller, Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), p. xii.

¹¹Miller, pp. 45-46.

CHAPTER II

ONE SHAPED AWRY:

THE CHARACTER OF THE NARRATOR

It is hardly possible to read great numbers of Hardy's poems without becoming aware that there exists in many of them some device to separate the reader from the action described in the poems. For example, a simple poem such as "The Three Tall Men" seems at the start to be a first-hand account. The poem is in the present tense, and it consists of a series of quotations which appear to be the record of a conversation directly overheard by the reader. The second part of the poem, while it continues to record conversation only and to do so in the present tense, begins ". . . a year back, or near then,"¹ and the third division of the poem removes the reader even further in time from the circumstances described, for the first section of the poem is now described as having taken place "years back. . . ." ² That even this third conversation took place long before the poem was written is made clear by the final two lines:

"Many years later was brought to me
News that the man had died at sea."³

The technique used in this poem is characteristic of Hardy's use of narration: the poem seems to invite the reader's close involvement with the situation it describes, but the narrator of the poem is used to make this involvement impossible by continuously reminding the reader of the great distance of time and situation that separates him from the action. Thus a poem which, at first glance, seems to be the transcription of an overheard conversation is, on a closer examination, shown to be more probably the transcription of a story told by a narrator to someone else.

One of the chief functions of Hardy's narrator is to call attention to the barrier of time that stands between the reader and what occurs in the poems, and in order to better fulfill this purpose, the narrator is frequently identified as an older man. Often, as in "The Three Tall Men," the reminiscent quality of the poem is not immediately apparent. "Beeny Cliff," for example, begins

O the opal and the sapphire of that
wandering western sea,
And the woman riding high above with bright
hair flapping free--
The woman whom I loved so, and who loyally
loved me.⁴

Until the third line of the stanza, it is not clear that the action of the poem is past. The past tense verb "loved" clarifies the temporal relationship of the action to the narrator and further hints that not only is the ride up Beeny Cliff long done with, but the love which the poem celebrates is itself no longer alive. The narrator's descriptions of the scene add to this premonition: the lovers are "cloaked" by a cloud, and the ocean is colored "with a dull misfeatured stain."⁵ Not until the final lines of the poem, however, does the narrator admit that the woman he speaks of is dead, perhaps long dead.

The woman now is--elsewhere--whom the
 ambling pony bore,
 And nor knows nor cares for Beeny, and
 will laugh there nevermore.⁶

The narrator of "Beeny Cliff" is typical in that "persons frequently used as protagonists in Hardy's lyrics are lovers or old men obsessed with memories."⁷ Poem after poem describes the same situation. In "At Castle Boterel," the narrator remembers himself and a girl he loved getting out to walk so that a pony pulling their cart uphill would have an easier time. He doubts that there was ever "a time of such quality, since or before,"⁸ but that time is long gone. He is now old:

. . . my sand is sinking,
 And I shall traverse old love's domain
 Never again.⁹

Poems based upon similar situations, wherein "the speaker of the poem is recalling a beautiful, lost moment in which early love (apparently youthful first love) is epitomized,"¹⁰ are so frequent that the reader comes to expect them. Despite the extremely reminiscent quality of such poems, however, Hardy seldom allows his narrator to sentimentalize his remembrances. "Concerning Agnes" begins with the narrator remembering a woman he had once loved and wishing

To dance with that fair woman yet once more
 As in the prime
 Of August, when the wide-faced moon looked
 through
 The boughs at the faery lamps of the Larmer
 Avenue.¹¹

His wishes can never be granted, for Agnes

. . . lies white, straight, features
 marble-keen,
 Unapproachable, mute, in a nook I have never
 seen.

There she may rest like some vague goddess
 shaped
 As out of snow;
 Say Aphrodite sleeping; or bedraped
 Like Kalupso;

Or Amphitrite stretched on the Mid-sea
 swell,
 Or one of the Nine grown stiff from thought.
 I cannot tell!¹²

The narrator certainly idealizes both Agnes and his memories of their love, but he does not become maudlin or sentimental about her. His use of the subjunctive may before the listing of the goddesses Agnes perhaps resembles suggests that he does not at all subscribe to the possibilities set forth in the last stanza and warns the reader not to accept them either. That may and the final line of the poem suggest instead that he realizes her humanity and mortality all too well; if she is "grown stiff," it is not from thought.

Several other of Hardy's poems involve a narrator who recalls not necessarily a youthful love affair, but his own youthful beliefs or aspirations. In "Yuletide in a Younger World," the narrator speaks of his youth as a time when he

. . . could glimpse at night
 On Christmas Eve
 Imminent oncomings of radiant revel--
 Doings of delight:--
 Now we have no such sight.¹³

He remembers an age of belief, a time when he still heard
 "the fartime tones of fire-filled prophets."¹⁴ He makes

evident the tremendous distance that separates him from the younger self he describes by his final musing question, "--Can such ever have been?"¹⁵

In these poems, Hardy's narrator puts between himself and the action of the poems not only the distance of time, but also the related distance of experience. He is an older man, worldly-wise, perhaps disillusioned, sometimes bitter. He is a man so changed from his younger self that he can scarcely comprehend the naiveté of his youth. He is not usually contemptuous of this naiveté, but he is careful to remind the reader that no matter how appealing the ideas of one's youth may seem, they are still definitely not tenable concepts for a mature man who faces reality. "The Oxen," for a well-anthologized example, tells of a legend of Hardy's youth which held that on midnight of Christmas Eve, the oxen would kneel to acknowledge the birth of Christ. The speaker admits that the legend is no longer popular, but he is nevertheless possessed of a great attachment to the old beliefs.

So fair a fancy few would weave
 In these years! Yet, I feel,
 If someone said on Christmas Eve,
 "Come; see the oxen kneel,

"In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
 Our childhood used to know,"
 I should go with him in the gloom,
 Hoping it might be so.¹⁶

The narrator treats the legend of his childhood gently; it is evidently a dear memory to him, and the ingenuous belief of his youth still has its allurements. Nevertheless, the reader is not allowed to believe that the proposed pilgrimage would really find the cattle kneeling at the stroke of twelve. It is true that, for the narrator,

. . . there is a nostalgia for the beliefs and impressions which give joy to other people, a wanting to share them, and a feeling that he cannot. And the pathos is not weakened by the suggestion that the speaker's vision may be the truer--the nostalgia and the isolation are still present.¹⁷

The narrator may want to be able to believe, but the most he can actually do is to hope that things might be as he once was told. The mood of the final line of the poem shows that the speaker's emotional response to his young acceptance of the pretty tradition does not override his knowledge that legend is not the same as fact. The narrator remains faithful to the lessons of his experience with the world, and his honesty forces the reader of the poem to do the same.

No matter how much distance he might thus achieve, Hardy was apparently not satisfied with pushing his narrator, and therefore his reader, away from involvement with the action of the poem merely by emphasizing the great temporal distances between them; he furthered the separation he hoped to achieve by creating in his narrator a desire for just such a lack of involvement. Hardy, the "poet-spectator of the universe,"¹⁸ thus created as his narrator a "disengaged observer,"¹⁹ a man isolated from his fellows. It seems that Hardy himself was fascinated with the idea of being able to be a spectator of life, unseen by all others; he wrote of himself,

. . . For my part, if there is any way of getting a melancholy satisfaction out of life it lies in dying, so to speak, before one is out of the flesh; by which I mean putting on the manners of ghosts, wandering in their haunts, and taking their views of surrounding things. To think of life as passing away is a sadness; to think of it as past is at least tolerable. Hence even when I enter a room to pay a simple morning call I have unconsciously the habit of regarding the scene as if I were a spectre not solid enough to influence my environment; only fit to behold and say, as another spectre said, "Peace be unto you!"²⁰

With this view of life in mind, it is perhaps not surprising to find poem after poem in which the narrator

expresses, directly or indirectly, a desire to be an observer only, "a spectre not solid enough to influence his environment." These poems vary a great deal in mood and intensity. In "I Am the One," for example, the desire is muted:

I am the one whom ringdoves see
 Through chinks in boughs
 When they do not rouse
 In sudden dread,
 But stay on cooing, as if they said:
 "Oh; it's only he."

I am the passer when up-eared hares,
 Stirred as they eat
 The new-sprung wheat,
 Their munch resume
 As if they thought: "He is one for whom
 Nobody cares."

Wet-eyed mourners glance at me
 As in train they pass
 Along the grass
 To a hollowed spot,
 And think: "No matter; he quizzes not
 Our misery."

I hear above: "We stars must lend
 No fierce regard
 To his gaze, so hard
 Bent on us thus,--
 Must scathe him not. He is one with us
 Beginning and end."²¹

Here the narrator claims for himself a unity with nature; he is an observer of whom none take note. He exists outside of action and involvement; he is seen and then dismissed.

He observes and records experience, but takes no part in life.

In other poems, the speaker's desire for non-involvement takes on a more extreme form and is perhaps pushed to its farthest limits in a poem significantly titled "A Wish for Unconsciousness."

If I could but abide
As a tablet on a wall
Or a hillock daisy-pied,
Or a picture in a hall,
And as nothing else at all,
I should feel no doleful achings,
I should hear no judgment-call,
Have no evil dreams or wakings,
No uncouth or grisly care;
In a word, no cross to bear.²²

Here the speaker has gone beyond desiring to be only a spectator and commentator on life; he has gone so far as to desire to become an object, to lose even sensory awareness, to have no emotional or mental participation in living.

For the most part, however, the narrator of the verses is content with a less drastic degree of escape. Often, one sees in the poems hints that the speaker's desire to keep himself free of involvement with others is at least partially a defense. Involvement leaves one open, unprotected; it makes one not only susceptible to pain, but practically

guarantees that pain will come. Thus Hardy's narrator, in thinking of a friend, decides

--That I will not show zeal again to learn
Your griefs, and, sharing them, renew my pain.²³

He is immediately ashamed of the selfishness of this thought, but, for all his shame,

. . . can bitterer knowledge be
Than that, though banned, such instinct was
in me!²⁴

This instinct is often repeated in Hardy's poems, although more usually without any accompanying sense of shame. In "Revulsion," the speaker decides that since

For winning love we win the risk of losing,
And losing love is as one's life were riven. . .²⁵

then it is much better not to love at all and therefore avoid as much pain as possible.

In another poem, the narrator hears old friends, now dead, speak to him, saying:

"We have triumphed: this achievement turns
the bane to antidote,
Unsuccesses to success,
Many thought-worn eyes and morrows to a morrow
free of thought.

. . .
"We've no wish to hear the tidings, how the
people's fortunes shift;
What your daily doings are;
Who are wedded, born, divided; if your lives
beat slow or swift.

"Curious not the least are we if our intents
 you make or mar,
 If you quire to our old tune,
 If the City stage still passes, if the weirs
 still roar afar."²⁶

The triumph that these dead friends have won, then, is a freedom from caring; they are, "with very gods' composure, freed those crosses"²⁷ which caring brings. In annihilation of involvement there is no loss, only the great gain of peace, and the narrator's envy of this state of mind is evident.

Quite aside from the aspect of self-protection, however, there exists another reason for the speaker's refusal of involvement, indeed, the major reason. In achieving a distance from other people and from the day-to-day concerns of life and in a change of mind brought about by experience, the narrator finds an objectivity which allows him to see the world more clearly than his fellows can. This superiority is evidenced in "An Unkindly May," in which the speaker compares his viewpoint with that of a shepherd busy counting his flock.

The sour spring wind is blurting boisterouswise,
 And bears on it dirty clouds across the skies;
 Plantation timbers creak like rusty cranes,
 And pigeons and rooks, dishevelled by late rains,

Are like gaunt vultures, sodden and unkempt,
 And song-birds do not end what they attempt:
 The buds have tried to open, but quite failing
 Have pinched themselves together in their quailing.
 The sun frowns whitely in eye-trying flaps
 Through passing cloud-holes, mimicking audible taps.
 I think. "Better to-morrow!" she seems to say.

That shepherd still stands in that white smock-frock,
 Unnoting all things save the counting his flock.²⁸

The speaker of the poem is able to see with greater clarity and detail precisely because he has no flock to care for; lack of caring saves him now not from pain, but from impercipience.

In "Self-Unconscious," the narrator again mourns that men cannot really see the actions in which they participate; he thinks of a friend who once walked along, "watching shapes that reveries limn,"²⁹ and paying no heed to all that surrounded him and which would never exist again as it was then.

O it would have been good
 Could he then have stood
 At a clear-eyed distance, and conned the whole.
 But now such vision
 Is mere derision,
 Nor soothes his body nor saves his soul.³⁰

This "clear-eyed distance" is what the narrator hopes to achieve by keeping himself a spectator of life and shutting

himself off from participation in action. Never does he seem to think that his decision entails a deprivation; the gain of perception is for him more than sufficient compensation for any cost his isolation demands.

Hardy's narrator is cut off from other men, not only personally, but also socially. As has already been noted, he cannot in honesty subscribe to the beliefs in which others of his age find comfort; furthermore, he does not agree with the values of his day. Perhaps because he sees things more clearly than other men, he realizes that the moral and social judgments by which his contemporaries measure each other often have little justice in them. For Hardy,

. . . the standard morals of society are always viewed, in his poetry as in his fiction, from the outside. . . . His deep instinct of pity is directed to the individual; and when with a telling word he flouts some crude social dogma, he seems to be saying: These rules are well enough for those who have not been trapped and hurt within their meshes, but I am thinking of this victim who is hurt and trapped!³¹

So is it with Hardy's narrator; the purpose behind many of Hardy's poems especially the shorter ones, seems to be just this flouting of the conventional values of society. For example, in "The Dead Bastard," a female narrator--by no

means unusual in Hardy's poems--mourns the death of her illegitimate child. She had once wished it dead for "the trouble and shame it brought,"³² because society attacked her and judged her an outcast, but her natural feelings take precedence over the weight of public opinion. The tone of the entire poem makes it clear that it is society, and not the mother, which is in the wrong. Similar situations occur frequently in Hardy's poetry, and almost always, the unmarried mother either finds her bastard child a source of great joy and comfort, despite the contrary teachings of society,³³ or, having been frightened into an abortion by fear of societal pressures, is conscience-stricken that she has yielded to unnatural impulses.³⁴

Hardy's narrator is often disillusioned and sometimes bitter, but his bitterness is not usually directed against the people whose actions he describes; them he almost always refuses to judge as responsible for their own weaknesses. When the speaker does assign responsibility for wrongdoing or seeming evil in the world, he assigns it not to the actors in the poems, but to the generally-unnamed something which causes them to act as they do. He compares the people he

observes to a blinded giant led by a dwarf in a sideshow:

Wherever the dwarf decided to go
 At his heels the other trotted meekly,
 (Perhaps--I know not--reproaching weakly)
 Like one Fate bade that it must be so,
 Whether he wished or no.³⁵

This viewpoint, which the narrator calls "the sorriest of pantomimes,"³⁶ leaves him unable to hold the people involved accountable for their actions. This passage, however, is atypical in that it shows the narrator blaming some perverse fate more than he usually does. He is a man who expects that things will not, in the long run, turn out well, but he has no clear conception of any planned mechanism of malice underlying the universe. The fault lies in that the world is ill-made for living up to what man has come to expect of it; reality has no connection with men's expectations of reality.

Seeing more clearly than other men by virtue of his isolation, the narrator understands that the universe is not actively malicious; instead, he generally regards it as being unconscious. Thus he addresses nature, wondering

When wilt thou wake, O Mother, wake and see--
 As one who, held in trance, has laboured long
 By vacant rote and prepossession strong--
 The coils that thou hast wrought unwittingly;
 Wherein have place, unrealized by thee,
 Fair growth, foul cankers, right enmeshed with wrong,

Strange orchestras of victim-shriek and song,
And curious blends of ache and ecstasy?--

Would that morn come, and show thy opened eyes
All that Life's palpitating tissues feel,
How wilt thou bear thyself in thy surprise?--

Wilt thou destroy, in one wild shock of shame,
Thy whole high heaving firmamental frame,
Or patiently adjust, amend, and heal?³⁷

It is not, then, nature which is at fault for man's unhappiness; nature is unconscious of its ways. The fault, if any is to be assigned, lies instead with man's lack of understanding of his position in the universe. Men expect too much from the world; they expect justice, meaning and purpose, and such things do not inhere in the cosmos. The narrator has come to see and accept the purposelessness of existence, and in this understanding he gains, if not peace, at least equanimity. Thus, when the world says to him,

"I do not promise overmuch,
Child; overmuch;
Just neutral-tinted haps and such,"³⁸

he can reply,

Wise warning for your credit's sake!
Which I for one failed not to take,
And hence could stem such strain and ache
As each year might assign.³⁹

CHAPTER II

FOOTNOTES

¹Thomas Hardy, "The Three Tall Men," Winter Words in Various Moods and Metres (New York, 1928), p. 38.

²Ibid., p. 39.

³Ibid.

⁴Hardy, "Beeny Cliff," Collected Poems (New York, 1925), p. 330.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷David Perkins, "Hardy and the Poetry of Isolation," ELH, XXVI (1959), 258.

⁸Hardy, "At Castle Boterel," Collected Poems, p. 331.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Alan Warren Friedman, "'Beeny Cliff' and 'Under the Waterfall': An Approach to Hardy's Love Poetry," Victorian Poetry, V (1967), 225.

¹¹Hardy, "Concerning Agnes," Winter Words, p. 53.

¹²Ibid., 86.

¹³Hardy, "Yuletide in a Younger World," Winter Words, p. 53.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 54.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 54.

¹⁶Hardy, "The Oxen," Collected Poems, p. 439.

- ¹⁷perkins, p. 267.
- ¹⁸J. E. Barton, "The Poetry of Thomas Hardy," in The Art of Thomas Hardy by Lionel Johnson (New York, 1928 revised ed.), p. 262.
- ¹⁹J. Hillis Miller, Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), p. 76.
- ²⁰Florence Emily Hardy, The Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840-1928 (New York, 1962), p. 210.
- ²¹T. Hardy, "I Am the One," Winter Words, pp. 5-6.
- ²²T. Hardy, "A Wish for Unconsciousness," Winter Words, p. 8.
- ²³T. Hardy, "A Confession to A Friend in Trouble," Collected Poems, p. 9.
- ²⁴Ibid.
- ²⁵T. Hardy, "Revulsion," Collected Poems, p. 11.
- ²⁶T. Hardy, "Friends Beyond," Collected Poems, p. 53.
- ²⁷Ibid.
- ²⁸T. Hardy, "An Unkindly May," Winter Words, pp. 15-16.
- ²⁹T. Hardy, "Self-Unconscious," Collected Poems, p. 311.
- ³⁰Ibid., p. 312.
- ³¹Barton, pp. 268-269.
- ³²T. Hardy, "The Dead Bastard," Winter Words, p. 76.
- ³³See T. Hardy, "The Dark-Eyed Gentleman," Collected Poems, p. 227; "A Practical Woman," Winter Words, p. 94.

³⁴See T. Hardy, "Reluctant Confession," Winter Words, pp. 24-25; "The Ballad of Love's Skeleton," Winter Words, pp. 177-179.

³⁵T. Hardy, "At a Country Fair," Collected Poems, p. 474.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷T. Hardy, "The Sleep-Worker," Collected Poems, pp. 110-111.

³⁸T. Hardy, "He Never Expected Much," Winter Words, p. 104.

³⁹Ibid.

CHAPTER III

WHAT PROFIT IT?

From the great care with which Hardy introduces into a large portion of his poetic work a narrator whose character is recognizably the same from poem to poem, and from the care with which this narrator is made known to the reader, it is evident that Hardy felt his device was worth a good deal of time and trouble. He must have believed that the persona he created helped his poetry achieve his purpose, for why else labor with a device which must have often led to added difficulty in composition? What is it that the narrator helps the poems to do?

As has been suggested above, perhaps the most noticeable thing about Hardy's employment of a narrator is the length to which the poet goes to keep the speaker separated from the incidents he describes. There exist between the narrator and the poems many barriers: passage of time, distance in space from a remembered site, difference of experience and attitude between the speaker and his younger self, separation

due to lack of involvement, and estrangement bred by isolation from the mainstream of contemporary thought. All of this careful distancing, however, does not keep only the narrator from becoming too closely involved in the poems; it forces the reader of the verses to an even greater lack of involvement. For in those poems in which Hardy employs his persona, the reader is dependent upon the narrator for all the impressions he receives. The narrator of a poem is as a god; in a very real sense, he creates the poetic cosmos in which the reader finds himself. The physical location of a poem, the bits of experience edited and presented to the reader, the values and meanings inherent in the poem--all these come to the reader only through the medium of the narrator. If the poet takes great care that even the narrator remain relatively uninvolved with the action, then the reader is automatically kept one step further removed than the speaker, the source of knowledge about the poem.

From just such distancing, Hardy gains for his narrator the objectivity which is necessary to seeing reality for what it is. The reader, too, gains in objectivity by being so forcefully kept uninvolved. It is important, however, to

And saying she'd not be bound
 For life to one man, young, ripe-year'd, or old,
 Left me--an innocent simpleton to her viewing;
 For, though my accout of years outscored her own,
 Hers had more hotly flown. . . .
 We never met as once so often lip on lip,
 And palter, and pause:--
 Yes; here it was!¹

In the first line of the poem, the narrator and the reader of the poem are together. The line, though brief, manages to suggest a closeness between the two; they are walking together, talking perhaps. The first phrase is in the present tense; by the second line of the poem, the narrator is already beginning to set a distance between himself and the incident he is going to recount. The next four lines of the poem involve an interplay between past and present, distance and closeness. The present scene, a winter's night, is contrasted with the green summer's day the narrator remembers; the death-like images of a mound "sheeted with snow" are set against a memory of a life-filled, fecund time when the seating place was "green and round." All these contrasts subtly emphasize the distance of time and season that lies between the speaker and the event he is describing, and as this distance increases, the reader is

pushed further and further from involvement in the poem. After having thus established for himself and the reader some degree of objectivity, the narrator goes on to tell of the end of a love affair. The final two lines of the poem echo the first two, returning the reader to the present and so keeping him from achieving any significant involvement in the action of the poem.

Implicit in the poem, but never directly stated, is a change in attitude within the narrator. He remembers his shock at his lady's story, and says that, while younger, he saw her story as one of ruination. That saw is in the past tense suggests that he no longer sees things in the same light, and the tone of regret in the last lines of the poem supports such a reading. It has taken the narrator a long time to change his opinion; he has learned to see the affair with objectivity after the passage of time and experience has somewhat erased his sense of personal involvement. The reader of the poem has little choice but to come to the same conclusion as the narrator. The difference between the two lies in the fact that the narrator's conclusion comes as a result of the objectivity he has gained, while

the reader reaches the same conclusion because no other possibility is offered within the context of the poem. This difference, however, is not immediately obvious to the reader; on any but a very careful reading of the poem, it seems that this judgment is his own instead of one that is forced upon him by the technique of the poem.

Hardy manages to achieve several other effects through his use of the narrator; the device is especially useful in poems in which Hardy wants to show an ironic aspect of life which has become evident to the narrator only after the passage of time. The idea that there is often a discrepancy between the way things seem to be and the way they really are always held a fascination for Hardy; this idea forms the theme of "A Wet August."

Nine drops of water bead the jessamine,
 And nine-and-ninety smear the stones and tiles:
 --'Twas not so in that August--full-rayed, fine--
 When we lived out-of-doors, sang songs, strode miles.

Or was there then no noted radiancy
 Of summer? Were dun clouds, a dribbling bough,
 Gilt over by the light I bore in me,
 And was the waste world just the same as now?

It can have been so: yea, that threatenings
 Of coming down-drip on the sunless gray,
 By the then golden chances seen in things
 Were wrought more bright than brightest skies to-day.²

The poem begins in the present tense, and characteristically, Hardy quickly switches to past tense, making it evident that the incident in which he is interested happened long ago. The poem begins on a dreary, rainy August day, and this day serves to remind the narrator of a time when he and another walked happily through a different August day, "full-rayed, fine." This memory and the difference of weather and mood which it makes apparent lead the narrator to muse upon whether the disparity between the two Augusts is actual. He ends by concluding that the days were quite possibly alike and that the apparent difference between them is a projection of his varying moods upon the scenes.

"A Wet August" allows the reader of Hardy even less chance than usual to become involved in the incident described in the poem. The first two lines of the first stanza set the scene, and the next two quickly sketch the time long past which the day calls to mind. The description of that day is exceedingly general; the reader does not even learn specifically who was then with the narrator or why the time of happiness ended. The rest of the poem consists of the narrator's musing about the reality of the day compared with

the way he remembers it. Enough time has passed between the first August day and the second for the narrator to develop a great deal of objectivity and perspective upon his memories, and the reader is kept almost completely outside the poem. The reader is able to see the thought processes by which the conclusion is reached, but he is given so little information that he has no basis upon which to formulate any answer other than that given by the narrator.

In "The Prophetess," Hardy uses much the same technique.

"Now shall I sing
That pretty thing
The Mocking Bird?"--And sing it straight did she.
I had no cause
To think it was
A Mocking-bird in truth that sang to me.

. . .

But after years
Of hopes and fears
And all they bring, and all they take away,
I found I had heard
The Mocking-bird
In person singing there to me that day.³

The poem begins characteristically, with the narrator making it clear that the incident recounted in the poem took place long before; having gained some perspective on the scene, he is able to see an irony of situation of which he was unconscious when he was himself involved in the affair. Again, since the

reader learns very little about the incident, he is unable to come to any conclusion other than that offered by the narrator. Perhaps more than any other way, Hardy uses his speaker to elucidate the ironic aspects of life.

There are, however, other important ways in which Hardy employs his narrator; one of these methods uses the objectivity and vision of the totality of experience gained by the narrator to present to the reader the poet's idea that time is not a progression, but a continuum. Hardy's narrator is well-suited to such use. Throughout the poetry, he has placed such a great distance between himself and the experiences of life that he comes to exist in the reader's consciousness as a sort of omnipresent observer who sees everything and unites his visions into a fairly comprehensive and eminently honest view of life; the reader is used to accepting the narrator's comments on his experiences and observations. This narrator, then, seems to the reader indeed capable of possessing such an insight into the workings of the cosmos that Hardy's idea seems not just a romantic fancy or a poetic convention, but an idea whose tenability must be considered.

Such an employment of the speaker is evident in "Rome:
On the Palatine."

We walked where Victor Jove was shrined awhile,
And passed to Livia's rich red mural show,
Whence, thridding cave and Criptoportico,
We gained Caligula's dissolving pile.

And each ranked ruin tended to beguile
The outer sense, and shape itself as though
It wore its marble gleams, its pristine glow
Of scenic frieze and pompous peristyle.

When lo, swift hands, on strings nigh overhead,
Began to melodize a waltz by Strauss:
It stirred me as I stood, in Caesar's house,
Raised the old routs Imperial lyres had led,

And blended pulsing life with lives long done,
Till Time seemed fiction, Past and Present one.⁴

In this poem the scene inspires in the narrator a vision of the past which becomes so real that ". . . Time [seems] fiction, Past and Present one." In other poems, time not only seems a fiction, but is actually so, a fiction which is accepted by those who have not the power to see things as they are. In "A Kiss," for example, the narrator says that a kiss once given him by his beloved is past, but not gone:

It cannot have died; that know we well.
Somewhere it pursues its flight,
One of a long procession of sounds
Travelling aethereal rounds
Far from earth's bounds
In the infinite.⁵

Hardy's poetry contains many verses which hold that the dead are gone from the living only in a manner of speaking; in the continuum of time, they live on in the past, which co-exists with both the present and the future.⁶

There is at least one other thing that Hardy clearly gains through his use of the narrator device. The reader of any substantial volume of Hardy's verse becomes, almost unconsciously, acquainted with the narrator's character, and there are many poems in which Hardy can let the speaker sketch a scene or incident and then let the reader's understanding of the narrator's world view make clear the intent of the poem. A good example of such a poetic tactic is in "Mad Judy."

When the hamlet hailed a birth
 Judy used to cry:
When she heard our christening mirth
 She would kneel and sigh.
She was crazed, we knew, and we
Humoured her infirmity.

When the daughters and the sons
 Gathered them to wed,
And we like-intending ones
 Danced till dawn was red,
She would rock and mutter, "More
Comers to this stony shore!"

When old Headsman Death laid hands
On a babe or twain,
She would feast, and by her brands
Sing her songs again.
What she liked we let her do,
Judy was insane, we knew.⁷

It is evident, both from what the reader knows of the narrator's attitudes and from the tone of the entire poem, that the speaker no longer considers Judy mad. In his sight, she takes a realistic, if somewhat eccentric, stand toward a world in which there seems to be little provision for human happiness and abundant possibilities for grief. This viewpoint, however, might not be so clear if there did not exist a body of poetry which makes such a conclusion explicit; the reader, knowing the narrator through those other poems, therefore gets more from the verse than is ever directly stated.

CHAPTER III

FOOTNOTES

¹Thomas Hardy, "The Mound," Winter Words in Various Moods and Metres (New York, 1928), p. 19.

²Thomas Hardy, "A Wet August," Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy (New York, 1925), p. 547.

³Hardy, "The Prophetess," Winter Words, p. 7.

⁴Hardy, "Rome: On the Palatine," Collected Poems, p. 93.

⁵Hardy, "A Kiss," Collected Poems, p. 438.

⁶See, for example, Hardy, "To Meet, or Otherwise," Collected Poems, p. 292; "The House of Silence," Collected Poems, p. 445; "Old Furniture," Collected Poems, p. 456; "Haunting Fingers," Collected Poems, pp. 559-560; "The Two Houses," Collected Poems, pp. 563-565.

⁷Hardy, "Mad Judy," Collected Poems, p. 138.

CHAPTER IV

NONE SHALL GATHER WHAT I HIDE:

THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE NARRATOR WITH THE AUTHOR

After studying any great amount of Hardy's poetry, a reader is almost forced to realize that a narrator of consistent character does exist throughout the verse, and he comes to know much about what sort of man this narrator is. The narrator of the poems seems to be a constant; that is, there is no discernible development of the narrator. He exists both in early and later poems with the same attitudes, the same distances and barriers set up between himself and the world, and the device is used by Hardy to achieve the same purposes. While the speaker of the poems does not possess a detailed history or a certain set of physical characteristics, his mental traits and general conceptions of life are well known to the reader, and any examination of the character of Thomas Hardy shows the reader many undeniable similarities to that of the narrator of the poetry. These similarities lead almost inevitably to a consideration of whether this narrator is indeed Hardy or

a guise which Hardy invents to further the purposes he hoped to achieve.

Hardy, like his narrator, valued the preservation of a certain distance between himself and life. From his notes which are reproduced in his second wife's The Life of Thomas Hardy, which is generally recognized as having been in truth written and edited by Hardy himself, it is evident that he was a reserved man. Even as a child this trait was noticeable; in school at the age of 13,

Hardy was popular--too popular almost--with his schoolfellows, for their friendship at times became burdensome. He loved being alone, but often, to his concealed discomfort, some of the other boys would volunteer to accompany him on his homeward journey to Bockhampton. How much this irked him he recalled long years after. He tried also to avoid being touched by his playmates. . . . This peculiarity never left him, and to the end of his life he disliked even the most friendly hand being laid on his arm or his shoulder.¹

It is easy enough to imagine Hardy's narrator spending just such a childhood, but Hardy's youthful reserve was offset by a most unreserved habit of falling desperately in love with various unattainable women: a schoolmistress,² a stranger who smiled at him from horseback,³ a girl from

Windsor,⁴ and "a gamekeeper's pretty daughter" with "beautiful bay-red hair"⁵ who was several years his elder, and all of these within a period of a year or less.

In his mature years and despite occasional protestations to the contrary, the Life shows Hardy to have been a man with many and constant friends in whose life and well-being he took an anxious interest. In his notebooks Hardy warned himself:

Be rather curious than anxious about your own career; for whatever result may accrue to its intellectual and social value, it will make little difference to your personal well-being. A naturalist's interest in the hatching of a queer egg or germ is the utmost introspective consideration you should allow yourself.⁶

Nevertheless, a much greater volume of entries in the notebooks shows Hardy to have cared enough about his relationships with other people to record again and again anniversaries of first meetings with friends, of pleasant incidents shared with his wife, and of the deaths of family and friends. His interest in these anniversaries does not seem at all like "a naturalist's interest in the hatching of a queer egg or germ," but instead borders on the sentimental. If Hardy did wish that he could obtain his narrator's position of dispassionate

observance of others, he seems to have been unable to secure it for himself in his personal life.

The narrator of Hardy's poems looks upon the planet he inhabits and finds it far from the best of all possible worlds. He sees that human happiness is seldom attained, but he generally refuses to regard the universe as being therefore malicious. He describes an amoral universe, a cosmos in which no ethic considerations inhere. When the speaker of the poems sees his lover being destroyed by time and calls this act cruelty, God replies,

. . . . "The thought is new to me.
Forsooth, though I men's master be,
Theirs is the teaching mind!"⁷

In another similar poem, God is amazed that men "use ethic tests I never knew,/Or made provision for!"⁸

Hardy repeatedly insists that he holds the same view of life as that described by his narrator; in a letter of 1920 he scolds Alfred Noyes for writing that Hardy's philosophy implies a malignant universe:

. . . all the same, my sober opinion--so far as I have any definite one--of the Cause of Things, has been defined in scores of places, and is that of a great many ordinary thinkers: that the said Cause is neither moral nor immoral, but unmoral: "loveless and hateless"

I have called it, "which neither good nor evil knows". . . . This view is quite in keeping with what you call a Pessimistic philosophy (a mere nickname with no sense in it), which I am quite unable to see as "leading logically to the conclusion that the Power behind the universe is malign".

In my fancies, or poems of the imagination, I have of course called this Power all sorts of names--never supposing they would be taken for more than fancies. I have even in prefaces warned readers to take them as such--as mere impressions of the moment, exclamations in fact. But it has always been my misfortune to presuppose a too intelligent reading public, and no doubt people will go on thinking that I really believe the Prime Mover to be a malignant old gentleman, a sort of King Dahomey--an idea which, so far from my holding it, is to me irresistibly comic. "What a fool one must have been to write for such a public!" is the inevitable reflection at the end of one's life.⁹

Despite Hardy's insistence, his notebooks, included in the Life, betray other feelings. He writes, for example, of "the difference between what things are and what they ought to be."¹⁰ That things ought to be a certain way surely entails some sort of inherent morality in the scheme of existence. In another note, he mentions a "FAILURE of THINGS to be what they are meant to be."¹¹ In a longer passage, Hardy argues:

. . . Law has produced in man a child who cannot but constantly reproach his parent for doing much and yet not all, and constantly say

to such parent that it would have been better never to have begun doing than to have overdone so indecisively. . . . The emotions have no place in a world of defect, and it is a cruel injustice that they should have developed in it.¹²

As in the previous passages, Hardy's choice of words implies an ethical judgment of the universe; for him, this "world of defect" embodies a "cruel injustice." In a similar passage, Hardy questions whether Nature "did not exceed her mission" when she evolved self-conscious beings who could realize the imperfections of creation.¹³

This difference is perhaps the crucial one that exists between Hardy and his narrator, for in this disparity one can see that the narrator embodies an ideal state of mind which Hardy sometimes achieves, always aims at, but cannot maintain. He insists, in the preface to Late Lyrics and Earlier and in his notebooks, that he indeed possesses such a point of view, but in many more numerous passages in the notes and in several of his "philosophical"--to use a description Hardy would have abhorred--poems which do not employ the narrator device, Hardy betrays a judgment of the cosmos which is framed in unmistakably moral terms. He speaks, for example, of a world in which

. . . the disease of feeling germed,
And primal rightness took the tinct of
wrong. . . .¹⁴

After reading such poems and notes, the reader realizes the great distance which, after all, separates Hardy from his narrator.

There is, however, a final consideration which makes any judgment on the question of the identification of Hardy with his narrator a qualified one, at best. The consensus of critical opinion is that The Life of Thomas Hardy, which bore Florence Hardy's name as author, was in actuality largely written, edited, and organized by Hardy himself. Therefore, what the reader comes to know of Hardy from the Life may be as carefully controlled a knowledge as that the reader gains of the narrator of the poems, and, if this be the case, then a comparison of Hardy's speaker with the Hardy who is known from the Life is a comparison, not of a mask with a man, but of a mask with another mask.

CHAPTER IV

FOOTNOTES

¹Florence Emily Hardy, The Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840-1928 (New York, 1962), pp. 24-25.

²Ibid., pp. 19-20.

³Ibid., p. 25.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., pp. 25-26.

⁶Ibid., p. 204.

⁷Thomas Hardy, "God's Education," Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy (New York, 1925), pp. 261-262.

⁸T. Hardy, "New Year's Eve," Collected Poems, p. 261.

⁹F. E. Hardy, p. 409.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 416.

¹¹Ibid., p. 124.

¹²Ibid., p. 149.

¹³Ibid., p. 218.

¹⁴T. Hardy, "Before Life and After," Collected Poems, p. 260.

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